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Washington, D.C. - As the U.S. House of Representatives passed legislation to improve Head Start programs around the country, Rep. Peter Welch successfully amended the bill to improve services to rural communities.

Head Start is the highly successful federal program that provides essential early childhood development and education services to disadvantaged children.

The amendment to the Head Start Improvement Act of 2007, H.R. 1429, addressed the unique challenges Head Start faces in rural areas.

Prompting the amendment was a January 2007 report by the National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services on Head Start in Rural Communities, which cited that rural Head Start programs have unique transportation, professional development, health, and parental involvement challenges.

"Every child, whether from rural, suburban or urban communities, must be ready to learn when they arrive at school. Head Start is an exceptional federal program, but it must recognize and support the unique challenges facing rural communities," said Welch. "One size does not fit all, but opportunity should be available to all."

Vermont has seven Head Start programs, serving more than 1,500 of the state's children. The towns of Brattleboro, Barre, Burlington, Newport, Rutland, Westminster, and Bennington are home to programs which serve the surrounding area.

H.R. 1497 creates new sources of funding for rural transportation and instructs the Secretary to allocate funds for outreach to eligible participants and teacher recruitment and retention in rural areas.

The amendment, successfully offered by Welch along with Reps. Zack Space (OH-18), Phil Hare (IL-17), and Jason Altmire (PA-04) specifically instructs the Secretary of Health and Human Services to give consideration to the unique needs of rural children by:

- developing innovative and effective models of professional development for staff living in and serving populations in rural communities;
- removing barriers to parental involvement in Head Start programs in rural communities;
- removing barriers to providing home visiting services in rural communities; and
- removing barriers to obtaining health screenings for Head Start participants in rural communities.

In addition, the amendment requires the Secretary to consider the needs of rural Head Start programs when entering into contracts with entities that will offer technical and training assistance to them.

The bill passed the House, 365-48, late in the day yesterday.